Interactive comment on “Estimation of high return period flood quantiles using additional non-systematic information with upper bounded statistical models” by B. A. Botero and F. Francés

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Received and published: 28 September 2010

General comments
The authors present a very interesting, and practically-relevant paper. There are very few recent papers on integrating deterministic, design floods (PMFs) and flood frequency curves. This paper is a welcome addition to this topic. I commend the authors for working on the problem. They present some useful results that I consider to important for advancing hydrologic risk analysis methods for dam safety.

In fact, I have had some very brief email discussions with the second author of this paper, when Pepe Salas sent me Blanca Botero’s thesis in the summer of 2006. It is good to see her results get submitted and published.

I have several comments on this paper. I submit them so that the authors might make some improvements in several areas. These include: adding some generalizations to Section 2 Upper bounded distributions; some clarifications and corrections to Section 3 Data Classification; and various specific comments on other portions of the paper.

Basically, the approach offered is mathematical curve fitting to the best, combined data sets available. There are a couple of unanswered questions that the authors could address as part of a “Discussion” section. These are:

What should this upper tail distribution function look like, and why?

What is the physical basis (if any) of the upper bound location parameter?

What physical arguments can you use to complement or justify the LN4 choice? Is there anything on rainfall or flood volumes (e.g. Naghettini et al. 1996), those from recent SCHADEX research, or from Sivapalan and coauthors that might guide you?

My simple view is this. Without strong physical justification for a particular distribution, the best approach would be to utilize several distributions and combine the results. O’Connell et al. (2002) do this in a Bayesian context, but importantly without the PMF and with a different class of distributions. In this way, important model uncertainty is attempted to be quantified. The authors should add some comments about the shape of the upper tail and its physical significance (or lack therof) for the EV4 and LN4 distributions.

If the authors could continue their investigations to address some of my questions, as part of subsequent studies and papers, I would certainly welcome some collaboration, and can be contacted at:

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Specific comments

Here are some specific comments by line number and page. I was one of the SERRA reviewers for this related paper:


Some of my comments on that paper are relevant for this paper. As I suggested Fernández et al. cite your work; it is appropriate for you to cite Fernandez et al. (2010). That paper has some similar elements to your paper; readers need to be aware of the relevant literature.

page 5415, last line onto next page: “The use of parametric distribution functions allows the increment of the return period of the requested quantile as much…” You need to clarify this statement. What you mean is: it is easy to extrapolate a parametric distribution.

page 5416, near line 10. Here a citation to Enzel et al. 1993 is appropriate, reinforcing the idea of a physical upper limit.

You may wish to provide an alternate view - that of no upper bound. See, for example, Papalexiou and Koutsoyiannis (2006) or Koutsoyiannis (2004). However, those arguments conflict with your central approach.

page 5417, Section 2, Upper bounded distribution functions.

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Page 5417, line 13. You really should add figure 2.21 from Botero 2006:

Figura 2.21. Aproximación al límite de las distribuciones EV4 (con v=20.64, k=1.3), TDF (con a=1163, b=-2.49, k=-0.46) y LN4 (con \(\mu = -1.18\) y \(\lambda = 1.19\)). g=12887 para todas ellas.

You could consider adding some more detail from Botero (2006) on EV4 and LN4, such as figures 2.7 - 2.8.

Similar to my comments to Fernandez et al., there is no physical justification of any of the distributions presented here. You need to consider adding some key missing distributions, thereby pointing out to readers there are different choices here. This is relevant because your results rely on a “best-fitting” single distribution.

Some key missing pieces in this section are other distributions with upper (and lower) bounds. These include:

1. four parameter kappa distribution (Hosking, 1994);
2. 4-parameter beta;
3. any generic mixture of other 2-parameter and 3-parameter distributions - here you could expand TCEV to function as TC-GEV or TC-GPA;
4. 4-parameter beta (with upper and lower bounds);
5. wakeby (Houghton, 1978).

What matters most in all this is the shape of the distribution function in the range of CDF=0.995 to CDF=0.99999. By limiting the class of distributions considered, you should add some stronger caveats in sections 5 through 7. For example, you could have sampled from a Wakeby as part of robustness. Would your results have changed?

The point here is the shape of the distribution function dictates your answer. This is clearly an unexplored area. Perhaps you can consider this as future research. This has been partially explored in a rainfall context with the PMP and a parabolic distribution. See Nathan and Weinmann (1999) and the differences in results for AEP of PMP and...
the distribution shape, sections 3.6.2-3.6.3. Siriwaneda and Weinmann (1998) provide
the study used in Australian Rainfall and Runoff.

You should modify figure 1 to indicate $x_b$ changes over time, and is not fixed. See for
example, figures 14 and 15 in Naulet (2002). The word “Proposed” for your classifi-
cation scheme needs to be removed. This classification scheme was best described
first by Stedinger et al. (1988a,b) and graphically shown by Baker (1989). You should
reword the sentence on page 5420 line 9 to reflect this, rather than Naulet.

Delete 's' in 'parameters; should read “parameter space.”

Here you should point out that PMF estimates are nonstationary - they tend to increase over time, and are highly uncertain. From U.S. experience, $G$ is
nonstationary and can increase by $1.5G$ over time.

Could this be modified to be a conditional pdf for the second part? Could $g$ in the
integral be some other value?

Future research should consider using a pdf for $g$, such as a 3-parameter lognormal
with a minimum estimate of the PMF as the lower bound.

The statement “To avoid a bias estimation in the number....” is incorrect. See Hirsch
and Stedinger (1987) Appendix A, pages 724-725. The first flood in your example
was 1778. The historic period should be started before 1778. If the magnitude of this
flood is in question, then you could either use a varying threshold, or simply raise the
discharge threshold to address this perceived “bias” issue.

The PMF uncertainty estimates chosen by the authors are too small, as compared to
what I have seen in nearly 20 years of practice in flood estimation for dam safety. The
Bureau of Reclamation has found PMF increases (nonstationarity) at many sites by a
factor of 1.5. This is at the upper limit of your implementation for your $G$ and $\hat{g}$.

Laurenson and Kuczera (1998) suggest an order of magnitude on PMP probabilities
is an appropriate estimate of one standard error, and two orders of magnitude might
represent notional 95% confidence limits.

You should add a caution statement here, that the results are
dependent on your EV4 distribution assumption.

References

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Interactive comment on Hydrol. Earth Syst. Sci. Discuss., 7, 5413, 2010.